

Remarks of Congressman Henry A. Waxman
The American Diabetes Association
Saturday, March 16 2002

Thank you for inviting me to be here. It's a pleasure to be able to meet with people about real issues that affect real people in America. I have spent a lot of time over my career working on health research and health services, and I admit to being frustrated a lot these days that the Congress and the Administration don't seem to want to face up to these problems. It's good to be with you to talk about them.

An Unusual Speech Request

Your conference organizers have asked me for an unusual speech this evening. I've been asked to talk to you about how to approach the Congress and how to persuade it to deal with diabetes.

I don't usually tell people how to lobby. In many ways, it seems like an industry that is already self-perpetuating—without needing encouragement from me. But for a cause like diabetes,

I'm willing to tell some of the insider information as I see it. Just promise that you won't give the Tobacco Industry any of my tips.

Pick your client

The first and most important task is the same for lobbyists as it is for trial attorneys: Pick a good client. By this, I mean that most of your success will depend on whether the cause you are bringing to Capitol Hill is compelling. You need an issue that will make people want to do something, to act, to say "There ought to be a law."

The bad news and the good news is that you have a very compelling issue. Diabetes is very serious. Its costs are huge—in both dollar and human terms. And there ought to be a law—a law that provides for research, prevention, and treatment. You already have a compelling issue and a very good client.

The Scarcest Thing on the Hill—Time

So now the question is how to convey that.

Well, first I want to give you a small bit of background about the Congress that will make it a little clearer. The scarcest thing on Capitol Hill is not money or legislation or staff or offices with good views of the Dome. The scarcest thing on the Hill is time. No one has the time to do what they need to do.

For instance, I am a Member of the House Commerce Committee. Members of that Committee are supposed to know and have opinions about all issues involving:

Medicare and Medicaid

Biomedical research

Public health

Food and drugs

Clean Air and Safe Drinking Water

Oil and natural gas

Renewable energy

Utilities

Nuclear energy

Toxic and nuclear wastes

Securities and exchange

Telecommunications

Interstate and foreign commerce

Consumer protection and product liability

The Federal Trade Commission, and

Travel and tourism.

And most Members are on two or more Committees. And are running from one hearing to another and are trying to keep up with what's going on on the House Floor and in their home district.

It's just not possible.

So all Members of Congress rely on their staffs—to tell them of issues, to advise them on proposals, and to meet with constituents and lobbyists.

But the staff are overwhelmed, too. They probably work on the same type of huge list of issues I just gave you. They are usually young and hardworking, but this is often their first job out of college, and they are often untrained in either the issues or in government. So they are always in a hurry to learn quickly and move on.

Concise, Clear, Targeted, Consistent

So this is your challenge: Convey your issues to Members of Congress and their staff in the briefest time possible.

To do that, you have to be concise, clear, targeted, and consistent. Let me describe each.

You should be concise. It is not useful to Members and their staffs for you to start with 30-page documents or academic journal articles. No one has the time even to skim these for the issues. A one-page information sheet may be filed and become a reference work. A treatise will be discretely tossed out.

You should be clear. Most Members and most staff are not experts. I would guess that most people do not understand any more about diabetes than that it is about insulin. It has taken years of groundwork to get people to understand stem cell research. Do not assume that Members or staff know about the links between diabetes and obesity, or that it can cause blindness, or that it affects each ethnic groups differently. Tell them the basics.

You should be targeted. Tell Members and staff what you want. Be concrete. And tell them only what they need to know to address the issue at hand. You don't need to tell them about all aspects of diabetes at once. It will overwhelm them and take too much time. If you are asking for research funding, tell them about funding histories and research opportunities. If you are asking for prevention services, tell them about medical costs that can be avoided and amputations that won't happen. If you are concerned about stem cells, tell them the promise of the research and the dangers of limitations.

Tell them which legislation is being considered and what you'd like them to do about it. And, whenever possible, tell them in terms that relate to their district, their constituents, and their own work.

You should be consistent. Don't contact them just once a year. Become a resource to the office. Give them follow-up materials about the development of issues. (By the way, part of being consistent is reinforcing people who listen and help. Say thank-you to staff and to Members. You'd be surprised how many people don't, and how easy it is to make yourself stand out.)

The fact sheets

So, with those rules in mind, I would look at the fact sheets that you have given me and give them high—but not perfect—marks. They are concise. They are clear. They relate to constituencies and districts.

But a quick skim (under time pressures) does not tell the reader what the ADA is asking for. These are good materials for someone who already is on your side and is looking for backup. But they do not aim at a target. You need to do that directly and bluntly.

What to expect from this Congress

Direct and blunt targeting is particularly important in this Congress. Along with all the usual pressures, there are especially difficult circumstances now.

First, and most obvious, is again time. Looking at the calendar, we can probably rely on only 50 legislative days left in this year. Your allies need to be given clear guidance toward your goals.

Second, there is almost no new money for any issues except defense and security. Almost all aspects of the President's budget—which is a rough blueprint of where the Congress will probably go—contain freezes or cuts in domestic spending.

The one major exception to this is biomedical research. NIH is supported by everyone—right, left, and center. But in all other health programs—whether CDC or Medicare and Medicaid or low-income clinics—there is little or no room for growth.

I don't expect the Congress to be quite so short-sighted. But there will be incredible pressure to keep spending low and to finish quickly.

Conclusion

So you are ready to go. You've got an important issue to tell people about. You can persuade them that there is much to do. Your materials are concise and clear and consistent.

And you are facing a distracted and short-sighted Congress that is short on time.

Go get 'em.